

# THE LAST AND FIRST ESKIMOS



Photographs  
**ALEX HARRIS**

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### Exhibition Itinerary

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Cover photographs by **Alex Harris** of Charlie Tommy, Newtok, May 1976, and Louise Kanrilack, Eskimo dancing, Tununak, April 1976.

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# INTRODUCTION

Alex Harris and Dr. Robert Coles went to Alaska for the first time in 1973, to conduct research for a new volume of the series, "Children of Crises." Their study of children soon became a study of village life. Since that first trip they have returned to Alaska many times - sometimes together, more often separately - but always remaining in touch and sharing their experiences. Many of the Harris photographs, together with an extensive text by Coles, were published as **The Last and First Eskimos** by New York Graphic Society in 1978.

It should be noted that Harris's work (and that of Coles as well) was never intended to be a complete survey of contemporary Eskimo life. Rather, Harris set out to photograph several remote rural villages where Eskimo traditions still persist. Cultural and environmental changes are occurring so fast in Alaska that many of the photographs have already acquired an historical perspective. By 1981, for instance, most of the residents of Shungnak had moved to new government housing, about a mile from the village Harris photographed.

In the areas Harris photographed (Tununak, Newtok, Shungnak, Ambler, Kobuk and Selawik), a subsistence way of life exists side-by-side with the cash-job economy, and both offer

viable options. These are villages where a grandfather cannot speak with his grandchildren because they speak different languages. It is this complexity - and the dignity of the people which has somehow remained intact - that Harris saw and set out to record and, in fact captured so well.

Alex Harris wishes to express his gratitude to the Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship Program for its support of his work in Alaska. We would like to add our thanks to Dr. Malcom Arth, Sarah Elder, Susan Henoch, Leonard Kamerling, Dr. Wendell H. Oswalt, Dr. Jay Ruby, Joseph Senungetuk, and Dr. James W. VanStone, whose advice and contributions helped to make this current exhibition possible. We also want to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for their generous support. The Endowment has proven to be a uniquely important source of support for exhibitions of significant social documentation.

Cornell Capa, Executive Director

Steve Rooney, Associate Director  
of Exhibitions

International Center of Photography



# THE LAST AND FIRST ESKIMOS

The following statements by Alaskan Eskimos appeared in **The Last and First Eskimos** (New York Graphic Society, 1978) and are reproduced here with the kind permission of the author, Robert Coles.

"My grandmother. . . said that in this family we have Alaska's last and its first Eskimos. She said that she was one of 'the last.' She said I'm one of 'the first.' She said I'd be lucky if I even remember when I'm older what it used to be like in our village. She said she's the child and I'm the grown-up, only she won't live long enough for me to teach her what I know. She. . . started describing what she did when she was my age - the same

thing(s) her mother did. But it's different for me, I know. . . I've never seen a whale. I don't like fish. My mother says I'm the first Eskimo she's met who doesn't like fish. I told her she may be the last one in our family to like it so much! We were only kidding."

"I remember one time a missionary was visiting us. . . I remember seeing some clouds in the sky, as we came home. The dogs were beginning to howl. They were upset with us. Why weren't we doing something faster to protect ourselves from the storm? The minister excused himself and left. We watched him leaving and suddenly the storm came upon us - like lightening in the summer. . . My father realized that the minister might not make it back to his church. I went with my father on the sled, to get the minister. We caught up with him, but he wanted to keep moving. He said. . . God would look after him. I was only a child, and I had no right to say anything. But I did. I said that the wind is God's breath, and we have to be careful, because when he blows that hard, he means for us to go inside and wait until he's decided to stop. The minister told me I was superstitious. . . Then he went on, and we went back home. We stayed inside for a long, long time - over a week, my grandchildren would say. . . Later, we heard that the minister had died on his way back to the church. . . My grandmother told me that the white man never listens to anyone, but he expects everyone to listen to him. . . The wind isn't a good listener! . . . We have survived because we know how to listen. The white peo-



First Communion Day, Tununak, May 1978



ple. . . are like the wind; they sweep over everything. I used to think we would survive them, too. But I'm not so sure. When I look at my grandchildren, I am not sure at all!"



Annie Lee, Shungnak, April 1974

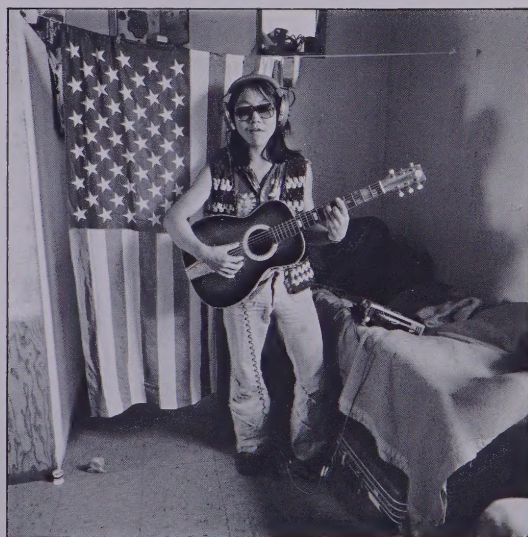
"He died a long time ago. I don't know how long. Even my daughter has a number; she says thirty years — when she was a girl as old as one of my grandsons. He has a number, too. He is twelve, he tells me. So what! All these numbers. What do they have to do with life? Does the sun have numbers for itself? The bears and caribou? The fish? The snow that greets us, stays with us, goes away crying? I watch the snow cry. My grandson says it is melting. I say no, it is crying. Who likes to leave? My father died with tears in his eyes. I wiped them away, and put them to my mouth. He has been with me ever since! He used to take me to watch the snow melt. He said it was sad to see it leave, even though we were going to have a good time in the summer.

"I don't sit here and wait for the summer. I am still surprised when I hear my grandchildren say that they are counting the days until summer. Why count? Each year they talk like that. Each year I smile! I want to tell them to become more like their Eskimo ancestors, but I feel my father's squeeze on my shoulder; he always said that an Eskimo will never stop being an Eskimo, even if he goes to the lower forty-eight, and comes back here dressed up like a white man from Fairbanks. An Eskimo is born to be an Eskimo, and he may

talk like the white man (my grandchildren do, more and more), but he will never stop being part of our people."

"If you are going to take our children's words to the lower forty-eight, don't forget to take ours too. A child should not go to the lower forty-eight alone. A child is for us, today, a leader. If we lose them, we are in more trouble than ever before. Every day my grandchildren tell me things I don't know and I remind them of what they'll soon forget! It is topsy-turvy here now."

"Once our people were together. We had our villages along the coast, or up some rivers, or on islands. Now we have relatives in the cities and our older children are going to schools there, or even in the lower forty-eight. I used to know who expected a letter when the plane came, and who was sending a letter. When my grandmother was my age there were no letters coming in or going out. I'm afraid my children and grandchildren will follow the letters - end up living somewhere else."



Newtok, July 1977

" . . . in the villages to the south, where the white man's machines haven't come yet, it's only a few years before the changes will come, and the



last Eskimos in Alaska without machines and motors will be going zoom, zoom across the land, or listening to bang, bang on the hi-fi. And television, it is coming: one village after another is getting it. We were late, and some don't have any sets - but it will happen: the winds from the lower forty-eight blowing hard, and bringing not snow or rain, but all of the white people's toys and tricks and ideas!"



Selawik, April 1974

"When my hair is all white, I'll surprise everyone; I'll fly away. I hope I don't get shot down! I told one of my grandchildren that my spirit would leave me and become a snowflake, or one of the geese or ducks, but today children laugh when I speak of an Eskimo's 'spirit.' They want proof! They want me to stop being 'old-fashioned.' They are like the missionary; they think the old Eskimos are 'superstitious.' Wait until that pipeline breaks, and there is oil all over Alaska, and the birds die and the caribou also die, and the children can't play without getting covered with kerosene or oil. Then they will wish they had flown away with me — gone way south with the geese! I tell them that, and they think I am being very funny. My oldest grandson said he wouldn't mind flying away on a plane, an air force bomber, but not with the geese! I am an old Eskimo, and he is a young one!"

"I had a dream a little while ago - very strange; in it there was a plane trying to land, with food and mail, but the landing strip was muddy, and the plane got stuck and crashed. There were a few birds circling over the plane, and I think I myself started flying toward them. . . . When I was a boy I wished I could fly - like a bird. Then I wished I could fly a plane. In Korea I got to fly on planes a lot. . . . I was proud to go in the army. . . . My son looks at the planes flying over us, and wonders if he'll ever get to be in one of them. I tell him I was in many, and it was more dangerous than being in a kayak when the ice is moving. There is always for us a chance to think fast, move fast; for the white people, when the engine stops working, that is the end."

*Dr. Robert Coles is a research psychiatrist at Harvard University, a Pulitzer Prize Recipient for Volumes II and III of **Children of Crisis** and the Visiting Professor of Public Policy at Duke University.*



Jack Angaiak, Seal hunting, Bering Sea at Tununak, April 1975



# VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

by  
Jay Ruby

In the course of Western civilization a number of rhetorical devices have been devised, and a variety of communicative media employed to explain, if not construct reality. From the time Westerners discovered a world beyond Europe these mechanisms were stretched to accommodate the travelers' tales of strange lands and exotic peoples.

One place in this "New World" that has fascinated us greatly has been the arctic and its inhabitants. This stark barren land makes us question our versions of reality. The people from the top of the world confound our culture-bound notions of the limits of human existence. It is a world which strains our devices of description and explanation.

Once the questions emerged, it quickly became clear that we needed the services of image-makers, journalists, explorers, scientists, and even novelists and poets, if we were to encompass and make sense out of the varieties of existence Westerners encountered. Among the most recent forms of inquiry and, interestingly enough, formalized about the time of the invention of photography, ethnography has been utilized by all of these chroniclers. It is at once a means of inquiry and a mode of presentation. The ethnographic method is a deceptively simple one—the ethnographer devotes a lengthy period of his or her life to living with and like the people he or she wishes to understand. During this period of participant observation it is necessary to suspend moral and cultural judgements and preconceptions and work hard to get a glimpse of how it feels to be someone else.

From this intense personal experience comes a knowledge—qualitative and empathic—that is

not possible to acquire through other means. The ethnographer translates this personal experience into terms understandable by others and conveys the experience and conclusions drawn from it as accurately and clearly as possible. While at times ethnographies resemble other rhetorical forms such as a novel or journalist's account, they are to be distinguished from them by the ethnographer's interest in and dedication to a humanistic and empathic representation of the culture of the people studied.

Robert Coles is a child psychiatrist and Alex Harris a documentary photographer. Yet their collaborations have produced ethnographic works. Their passion for understanding how people live caused them to adopt the role of participant observer.



Daughters of George & Sophie Cleveland,  
Shungnak, October 1975



Harris eschewed the working style of the press photographer who seldom gets to know his subjects intimately, and even of the documentary photographer who sometimes allows his social concerns to organize his perceptions in advance. Instead, Harris used the experience of living with a people to give shape to his images. In doing so he continues a history of visual ethnography in the Arctic started by Robert Flaherty with his 1914-1916 photographic studies and in his 1922 monumental motion picture, "Nanook of the North".

Since ethnographers are in effect trying to create a "portrait" of a people and since the people ethnographers tend to depict are often exotic to their Western audiences' personal experience, it is not surprising that most ethnographers use photography in their work. Indeed an ethnographic study without some photographic illustrations is a rarity. While all modern ethnographers are at least amateur photographers and virtually every field worker carries a camera, there is in addition a history of collaboration between field workers and professional visual artists which predates both photography and the social sciences.

The earliest explorers realized the inadequacies of words alone to describe the wonders unfolding before their eyes and logically employed artists to render images of these places and people. For example, as VanStone and Oswalt point out (in their accompanying article), in 1778 James Cook hired John Weber to portray the costumes and customs of the Pacific Eskimo. Sometimes these artists were not privileged to accompany the expedition but had to render images based upon stories told by the explorers. Perhaps the most famous of these collaborations for purposes of illustration are the drawings of Seth Eastman used in Henry Schoolcraft's 1851 six volume ethnographic description of native Americans.

Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology, was among the first social scientists to employ the camera as an ethnographic recording device in the arctic. In 1883, he took a large glass plate view camera with him. Largely dissatisfied with the results, he included none of these images in his publications. However, upon his return to the Northwest coast in 1889 he employed a professional photographer, Hastings, to produce images of the ceremonial life of the Kwakiutl. Boas's work with Hastings along with other collaborations such as the photographer Edward Curtis's

involvement with anthropologist Frederick Hodge, created a climate in which photographers and ethnographers worked together. (Margaret Mead's many projects with Paul Byers and Ken Heyman and John Collier's Nova Scotia study with the Whitings are only the most commonly known examples of this legacy.)



Newtok, May 1976

We see in the collaborations between Coles and Harris a continuation of this tradition. They share the same interests and concerns for people outside the mainstream, and realize they must participate in the lives of those they wish to understand. They trust and recognize the differences in their training and in the products which result. They are able to share their thoughts and their preliminary ideas while in the field without either dominating or dictating to the other. In the end they both produce portraits—Coles in words and Harris in pictures—which give us a mosaic not obtainable through a single effort.

**Dr. Jay W. Ruby** is an associate professor of anthropology at Temple University, the Co-Editor of *Studies of Visual Communication* and the Director of The Center for Visual Communications.



# ALASKAN ESKIMOS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

James W. VanStone and Wendell H. Oswalt

**I**ntroduction. When first encountered by Europeans, Eskimos were more widespread than any other aboriginal people, occupying nearly half of the top of the world. Their life-style represents a singular achievement in the development of cultures around the world. The cultural adaptations of Eskimos to arctic and subarctic environments are without equal, and the dome-shaped snowhouse justly symbolizes their conquest of the far north. Eskimos are stellar technologists, their clothing, harpoons, and kayaks being among the most complicated manufactures of aboriginal peoples anywhere. Less tangible qualities of Eskimo life have also attracted attention. Their singular self-reliance, personal freedom, and reputation for coping courageously with adversity strikes a responsive note in our own value system. A good indication of our admiration for Eskimos is that more books and articles have been written about them than about any other aboriginal people.

The Eskimo habitat, stretching from east Greenland across northern North America to eastern Siberia, is far more varied than most people imagine. Although the core of their homeland is along the tundra shores of northern Canada and Alaska, they also lived along fjords in Greenland, inland lakes in central Canada, rivers in Alaska and Labrador, islands in the Bering Sea, and deep bays fronted by the Gulf of Alaska. The regional flavor of their cultural responses to specific environmental conditions is especially notable. Most Eskimos harvested sea mammals, caribou, and fish for their livelihood, but in some areas they never hunted seals (Barren Grounds of Canada), never fished or killed caribou (northwest Greenland) even though these species were available, or never saw a polar bear (southwest Alaska). Likewise the populations differed widely in material adaptations. Our stereotype portrays them enveloped in fur clothing, but some Eskimos wore sleeveless skin garments and went barefoot (Kodiak Island, Alaska). Many used kayaks, but some did not make any boats at all (northwest Greenland), and others had birchbark canoes (riverine Alaska). Some Eskimos never

traveled by dog team (Alaska's Pacific coast), and although dome-shaped snowhouses prevailed widely in central and eastern Canada, most Eskimos never saw or made snowhouses. Localized differences such as these indicate the remarkably varied adaptations of Eskimos to their northern homelands.

Eskimos also occupy an interesting position within the twists and turns of New World history. Theirs were the first archaeological remains discovered by Europeans (Norse explorers of southwest Greenland in the tenth century A.D.), they were the first North Americans seen by Europeans (Norse explorers of Labrador about A.D. 1000), and some were taken to Europe by explorers quite early (by Martin Frobisher in 1576). Their methods of survival in the arctic were adopted by some explorers and were well-nigh indispensable to those who faced great adversity. Furthermore, although Eskimos were the first North Americans encountered by Europeans, they were among the last of the native Americans to abandon their traditional way of life as a result of Euro-American contacts.

It may surprise us that Alaska played a relatively unimportant role in the introduction of Americans to Eskimos. An awareness of these people grew first from the nineteenth-century maritime expeditions seeking a Northwest Passage through northern North America. The 1845 passage search led by Sir John Franklin raised high hopes because of his previous accomplishments in arctic exploration, but by 1846 both ships of the Franklin expedition were feared lost. During the next few years nearly forty separate parties searched for survivors and most of these expeditions had frequent contact with either Canadian or Alaskan Eskimos. Later Robert E. Peary began his attempts to reach the North Pole, and American interest in his progress was intense. Peary and his wife wrote several books about this dramatic quest, and the Polar Eskimos of northwest Greenland figure prominently in these accounts. It would seem that American stereotypes about Eskimos came largely from the reports of Polar Eskimos where snowhouses



prevailed, bear skin clothing was common, and dog teams were mushed across arctic wastes by hunters seeking out seals and polar bears. Eskimos these people were indeed, but in many ways quite unlike their relatives in Alaska.

Alaska, although a relatively limited sector of the aboriginal Eskimo habitat, has long supported the population majority. In early historic times about 20,000 Eskimos lived in all of Canada and in Greenland, whereas about 30,000 lived in Alaska. The sea mammal population was more varied and abundant in Alaskan waters than elsewhere, and an especially nutritious and dependable source of food, the Pacific salmon, was plentiful and available in much of the area. Thus it is not surprising that the largest Eskimo "tribe," the Koniag that possibly numbered 6500 persons, centered on Kodiak Island, Alaska. Also in Alaska was the largest permanent Eskimo village; about 500 Eskimos clustered in the settlement of Wales located at Cape Prince of Wales along Bering Strait. The variety of localized food resources enabled most Alaskan Eskimos to spend a major portion of each year at permanent settlements, and unlike their eastern relatives, starvations were uncommon among them. Settled village life, along with direct or indirect contact with the Aleuts, Alaskan Indians, and Siberian peoples, contributed a richness to the Alaskan Eskimo life-style unreported in any other sector of their habitat. Artistic achievements were far more pronounced in Alaska than elsewhere, and an elaborate round of religious ceremonies, including masked performers, was developed. Among Alaskan Eskimos too we find the greatest ecological diversity. Along the northern coasts the people concentrated on hunting seals and, to a lesser extent, great whales, but in the Brooks Range and along northern Seward Peninsula the people depended largely on caribou. Rivers from the Kobuk in the north to the Nushagak in the south supported subcultures whose members depended primarily on salmon for their livelihood. Villagers settled along the Bering Sea coast combined hunting seals and walrus with fishing for salmon, and the same was true of those fronting the north Pacific Ocean, where great whales were also hunted. A striking characteristic of Alaskan Eskimo subgroups was the fine-tuning of their economies to these localized differences in environment.

Linguistic studies indicate that Eskimo culture appears to be most deeply rooted in Alaska. Eskimo and Aleut languages belong to

the same linguistic phylum, Eskaleutian, and the distance separating the two is said to be comparable to that between English and Russian. Western Eskimo (Yupik) is the language of those Eskimos living south of Nome, and Eastern Eskimo (Iñupiaq) is spoken in the area extending eastward from Nome, across the rim of North America to east Greenland. The Western Eskimo language is divided into four major dialects (Siberian, Nunivak, Mainland, and Pacific), which are spoken in Alaska and an adjacent sector of Siberia.

**T**he Russian Era in Alaska. Before the end of the sixteenth century, Russian fur traders had crossed the Ural Mountains and spread eastward throughout northern Asia. In 1741, Vitus Bering, a Dane serving in the Russian navy, sailed from Kamchatka and sighted the American coast in the vicinity of Mt. St. Elias. He landed on Kayak Island, where George W. Steller, the expedition's naturalist, located an abandoned camp that may have belonged to Eskimos. Soon after Bering's voyage, Russian fur hunters ventured to the Aleutian Islands, where they reaped fabulously rich harvests of foxes and sea otters. By 1762, the Russians had reached Kodiak Island where they made their first extensive contacts with Eskimos. Both the Aleuts and the Koniag Eskimos were ruthlessly exploited by these adventurers, and neither population ever recovered from the negative impact of this experience. In 1783, a company of Siberian merchants, formed to exploit the American fur trade, established a small colony at Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island, and in 1799, as the Russian-American Company, it was awarded a state monopoly. Headquarters were moved to Sitka in 1800, and this small settlement then became the capital of Russian America.

In 1778, Captain James Cook mapped much of the Alaskan coastline as far north as Icy Cape. Cook was the first person to fully recognize the widespread uniformity of Eskimo culture. While in Prince William Sound, he noted how much the local people fit the description of Greenlanders recorded by David Crantz. Cook's observations provide considerable cultural detail about Pacific Eskimos, and John Weber, the artist accompanying the expedition, accurately depicted Western Eskimo habitat, clothing, and dwellings.

Early in the nineteenth century the number of fur-bearing animals along the north Pacific arc declined abruptly, and the Russian-American Company turned its attention to the area north



of the Alaska Peninsula. When the company established trading posts in southwestern Alaska, it found that the local Eskimos already had obtained Russian trade goods sent via the Chukchi from posts along the Kolyma River in Siberia. Other middlemen in this long-distance trade were the Eskimos of Sledge and King islands in the northern Bering Sea. This trading network, reaching deep into the interior of Alaska, was detrimental to the effectiveness of newly established Russian-American Company posts in southwestern Alaska. The company had not succeeded in diverting the Siberia-Alaska trade to its own posts when Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867.

Beginning in 1829, priests of the Russian Orthodox Church were sent to the trading posts along the Nushagak, Kuskokwim, and Yukon rivers in southwestern Alaska. They were successful to a limited extent in converting Eskimos to Christianity in the immediate vicinity of the posts, but their influence was far more ephemeral in the remote villages visited once or twice a year. Nonetheless, throughout southwestern Alaska large numbers of Eskimos were baptized, lay readers were trained, and some community chapels were constructed. Parish schools were established at the mission centers, but the pupils were mainly the children of company employees. A major obstacle confronting Orthodox priests during these early years was the hostility resulting from the devastating smallpox epidemic of 1838-1839, which the Eskimos and Indians blamed on the Russians. The rapid spread of several exotic diseases decimated the population and led to serious social, economic, and political disruptions.

In assessing the effects of Russian contact on the Eskimos of western and southwestern Alaska, the role of the fur trade and fur traders is of primary significance. There is little doubt that after 1840 the Eskimos devoted an ever-increasing amount of time and effort to trapping. To some extent at least, fur production had always been a by-product of modified-traditional subsistence activities, but it should be noted that most fur-bearing animals were of little intrinsic value to the people. The diversion of effort from hunting to trapping resulted in a substantial loss of subsistence productivity since fur bearers provide considerably less meat per animal than do caribou or seals. Thus Eskimos were forced to become increasingly dependent on traders to fulfill nutritional needs that might otherwise have

been satisfied by local resources.

The influence of Russians on Alaskans did not end with the sale of the territory to the United States. The Russian Orthodox Church remained, and even though the priests faced vigorous competition from Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries, the church retained and has continued to acquire many converts among the Eskimos of western and southwestern Alaska. Russian place names are still used along the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers, and many Russian words have been incorporated into the Yupik language. Much of the area of Russian influence in Alaska is occupied by Indians, but in the west and southwest the Russian heritage is very much a part of contemporary Eskimo culture. Early Anglo-Americans were to make their presence felt most strongly north of Norton Sound in areas that, strictly speaking, were never really part of Russian America.

**The American Era in Alaska to 1940.** The advent of American jurisdiction brought no major changes within Alaska, and most native Alaskans were unaware of the transfer. In fact, as late as 1908 when an official of the U.S. Bureau of Education made a tour of inspection in the territory and visited settlements along Bristol Bay, he was shocked to learn that many Eskimos had no knowledge of the United States government and still believed themselves under the rule of Russia.

The earliest systematic accounts of Eskimo life were made by young men in the service of the United States government. The most outstanding of these investigators, most of them self-trained and interested in all aspects of natural history, was Edward W. Nelson of the Army Signal Service. In 1877, Nelson was stationed at St. Michael to make meteorological observations, but he was also instructed to collect data about local geography, zoology, and Eskimos. During his term of duty, which ended in 1881, he traveled widely throughout western Alaska and obtained more than 10,000 ethnographic specimens that are now in the U.S. National Museum.

Significant agents of culture change during this era were the commercial whalers, who had a great impact on Eskimos in many coastal communities. After 1850, ships passed through Bering Strait each summer in pursuit of bowhead whales; the whalers were after baleen, the long, flexible strips in a whale's mouth through which its food is filtered. Large quantities of baleen were



obtained during these hunts, and the whalers also traded with the Eskimos for it. This brought the natives of northwestern Alaska their first sizeable amount of trade goods as well as considerable interaction with outsiders. After 1880, and the introduction of steam-powered vessels, many whalers wintered in the arctic which greatly increased their contacts with native people. When the demand for baleen began to fall off, some whalers found it profitable to expand their trade with the Eskimos for other local products. By the time commercial whaling came to an end in the second decade of the present century, traders had already become residents in some of the villages.

In 1867, a San Francisco firm acquired the assets of the Russian-American Company. Soon reorganized as the Alaska Commercial Company, this firm began to dominate trade in western and southwestern Alaska. When the small-scale traders of the early American period could no longer compete, the Alaska Commercial Company achieved a monopoly. During the period of competition, before 1883, the Eskimos were able to manipulate traders rather effectively, but monopolistic conditions combined with greater dependence on trade goods and a decline in fur-bearing animals, consolidated the power and authority of the merchant. During this early American period the Eskimos adopted many new items of material culture with a minimum of disruption in their modified-traditional way of life. More disruptive was the continuing loss of subsistence autonomy that had begun during the Russian era.

Somewhat paralleling the effects of whaling in the north was the commercial salmon fishing industry that developed in southwestern Alaska, along Bristol Bay, in the 1880s. In the early years of this industry, most of the actual fishing was done by Euro-Americans, and imported Chinese laborers performed the cannery work. Gradually some Eskimos obtained employment in the canneries, but it was not until World War II that they began to participate more fully in the industry. From this time on, Eskimos increasingly encountered different races and life-styles during their summer participation in the Bristol Bay fishery.

Missions were maintained by the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska after 1867, but competition from other denominations increased significantly. Roman Catholics and Protestants were successful, at least in part, because they began work at a time when the traditional belief

system was disintegrating. Shamans and other part-time religious specialists were no longer able to keep the supernatural world in harmony with the real one. A decline in the number of game animals, increased indebtedness to traders, and the high incidence of illness and death from exotic diseases brought on by an ever-increasing white population created an emotional climate favorable to the concept of individual salvation.

All Christian missionaries firmly believed in the importance of educating children and the early history of formal education for Alaskan Eskimos is intimately connected with the history of missions. Not until 1905 did public education begin in most Eskimo communities; henceforth, the steady expansion of federal schools resulted in greater governmental control over the people. As Eskimos came to recognize the advantages of having their children learn English, they adapted their seasonal routine so that they would be in the villages during the school year. Family mobility was thereby reduced, and young people were less able to learn how to participate in subsistence activities.

Health care was another important service provided first by missionaries or teachers, but government-sponsored medical service had become available in most communities by 1910. Tuberculosis was by then endemic and was killing or crippling large numbers of people. Traditional healers, the shamans, were helpless against it, and even government aid was far from effective. Adequate health care was not introduced into the villages until after World War II. By then the debilitating nature of introduced diseases had weakened the ability of many Eskimos to pursue traditional subsistence activities and left them unable to cope with the many problems created by a rapidly changing cultural setting.

A reindeer herding program was instituted in western and northwestern Alaska by the federal government in 1892 in the hope of providing the Eskimos with a new source of food after unrestricted commercial hunting in the second half of the nineteenth century caused a decline in sea mammals. Many Eskimos tried herding, but the program eventually failed because the people were accustomed to a relatively stable village life. Eskimos found the isolation of reindeer camps difficult to accept. Furthermore, the difference between obtaining food by hunting animals and by tending them is considerable. Some young Eskimos were willing to become short-term herders, but few viewed the reindeer industry as a



lifetime occupation.

From the first influx of miners into the Yukon valley at the beginning of the Klondike gold rush in 1897 until the marked decline of diggings in west-central Alaska about 1920, Alaskan natives were exposed to a new force in their lives and to an unprecedented but limited economic opportunity. On Seward Peninsula, the Nome stampede in 1900 led to the first interaction of Eskimos with Euro-Americans other than whalers, traders, and missionaries. Employment was frequently available, especially in mining camps, where Eskimos provided fish and game for the miners and performed menial chores. For most it was their first experience with wage labor as well as with outsiders who came into the country to exploit resources different from those they themselves used. Eskimos had no active role in gold mining. Instead, they provided services useful to the miners, and their subordinate role, one of being second-class citizens in their own environment, was clearly established at this time.

The years following the decline of Alaska's gold diggings were relatively stable as far as relations between Eskimos and Euro-Americans were concerned. Commercial fishing continued to develop, but most miners left the territory, and many areas once more became isolated backwaters. It was the beginning of World War II that ushered in the modern era marked by rapid population growth and intensive culture change.

**The American Era Since 1940.** The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor foretold major changes in Eskimo life. Military construction projects during and after the war enabled many Eskimos to obtain jobs for the first time, sometimes close to their home villages. Of even greater impact on

isolated villages was the formation of the Alaska Territorial Guard, which was set up as a first line of warning and defense in coastal Alaska. The effect of the military organization on village life can hardly be over-estimated. The hierarchy of command, rigid discipline, and the emergence of leaders who were young undermined traditional values and harmony in many villages. The pay for soldiering, combined with participation in a wage labor economy, made the subsistence base and work patterns of old far less meaningful.

By the 1950s, village life was permanently altered in many aspects other than those of leadership and subsistence. Eskimo material culture now consisted largely of imported industrial manufactures, most families lived in log or frame houses, and trips by airplane were becoming as commonplace as dog-sled travel. Educational opportunities for village children expanded as increasing numbers were sent to high schools away from home. Later new village schools would permit secondary education within each village, and university attendance became feasible for the better students. Direct control of village affairs by missionaries, traders, and teachers declined as the Eskimos themselves became increasingly Americanized.

In human terms a dramatic change in Eskimo life began at this time with a vast improvement in health care. Tuberculosis was a major target, and a chemotherapy program instituted by the U.S. Public Health Service virtually eliminated the disease by 1970. As health care delivery systems improved, along with better living conditions, the overall death rate declined abruptly, and village populations began a rapid increase.

Before World War II teachers, missionaries, and traders alike had a limited capacity to pro-

Caribou hunting,  
Ambler, October 1973





vide social services to Eskimos, yet they all clearly recognized that in many villages poverty and dismal living conditions were common. At the end of the war social security benefits and relief programs became available, and a systematic effort was made to improve living conditions in the villages. Substandard homes were replaced, wells drilled, electricity provided, and old school buildings replaced. These federally inspired innovations made the villages more pleasant and healthful places in which to live within a comparatively few years.

Surprisingly, Eskimo rights to their land were ill-defined by the federal government until the 1960s. This was largely because native Alaskans were not effectively organized, a situation that began to change in 1962 when an Eskimo, Howard Rock, launched a Fairbanks newspaper, **Tundra Times**, as the voice of native Alaskans. The Alaskan Federation of Natives, representing the interests of all native peoples, was founded in 1966, and the question of Aleut, Eskimo, and Indian land rights was given paramount consideration. During the same year native Alaskans, lacking a land settlement, protested the federal sale of gas and oil leases along the north coast, and it was suspended by the Secretary of the Interior. The protest resulted in a strange alliance of native peoples, the state of Alaska, and major oil companies, all seeking to resolve the land issue and finally achieving that goal.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, passed by Congress in 1971, extinguished all aboriginal native rights based on land use and occupancy. Native Alaskans would receive fee simple title to 40 million acres of land and 962.5 million dollars over a number of years. For this land they relinquished claim to 325 million acres. Those eligible were Alaskans with one-quarter or more Aleut, Eskimo, or Indian blood. Twelve regional corporations were established within the state (a thirteenth was later added for persons not living in Alaska), and each corporation was to manage the assets of a particular area. The act also provided for the creation of village corporations within each regional corporation. The goals of the ANCSA were forthright, but the charters under which the corporations were established have proved immensely complicated because so many state and federal agencies are involved in implementing the terms of the act. The corporations are business organizations whose corporate stock can be sold publicly after 1991. This means that at that time their control may pass out of

native Alaskan hands. Thus far, most Eskimos have derived neither significant nor steady income from the investments of their corporations, and it is possible that they may never do so. Instead, corporate bureaucracies have absorbed much of the available money in their administration.

It was clearly the intent of the federal government that title to the lands involved in the settlement be conveyed promptly to the corporations, but by 1981 most corporations had received only about twelve percent of their primary entitlement. This has been a major barrier to potential development of the land since the corporations must have title before they can begin any development.

An indirect and positive benefit of the Settlement Act has been the emergence of a far clearer sense of ethnic identity among Eskimos in Alaska. They are now working together for the first time in their own organizations for their own future. An expanded pride in being Eskimo has resulted in far clearer feelings of purpose. Efforts are being made to preserve and revive the language as well as selected aspects of old traditions amid a developing atmosphere of cultural awareness. People in most communities have retained an identity with the land and a deep emotional attachment to it. Few would want to return to an aboriginal life-style, even if this were possible, but few have abandoned their cultural heritage. Instead most Alaskan Eskimos seek a continuing accommodation with the ways of Euro-Americans but at the same time are attempting to retain their primary identity as "real people," either Yupik or Iñupiaq.

### Suggested Reading

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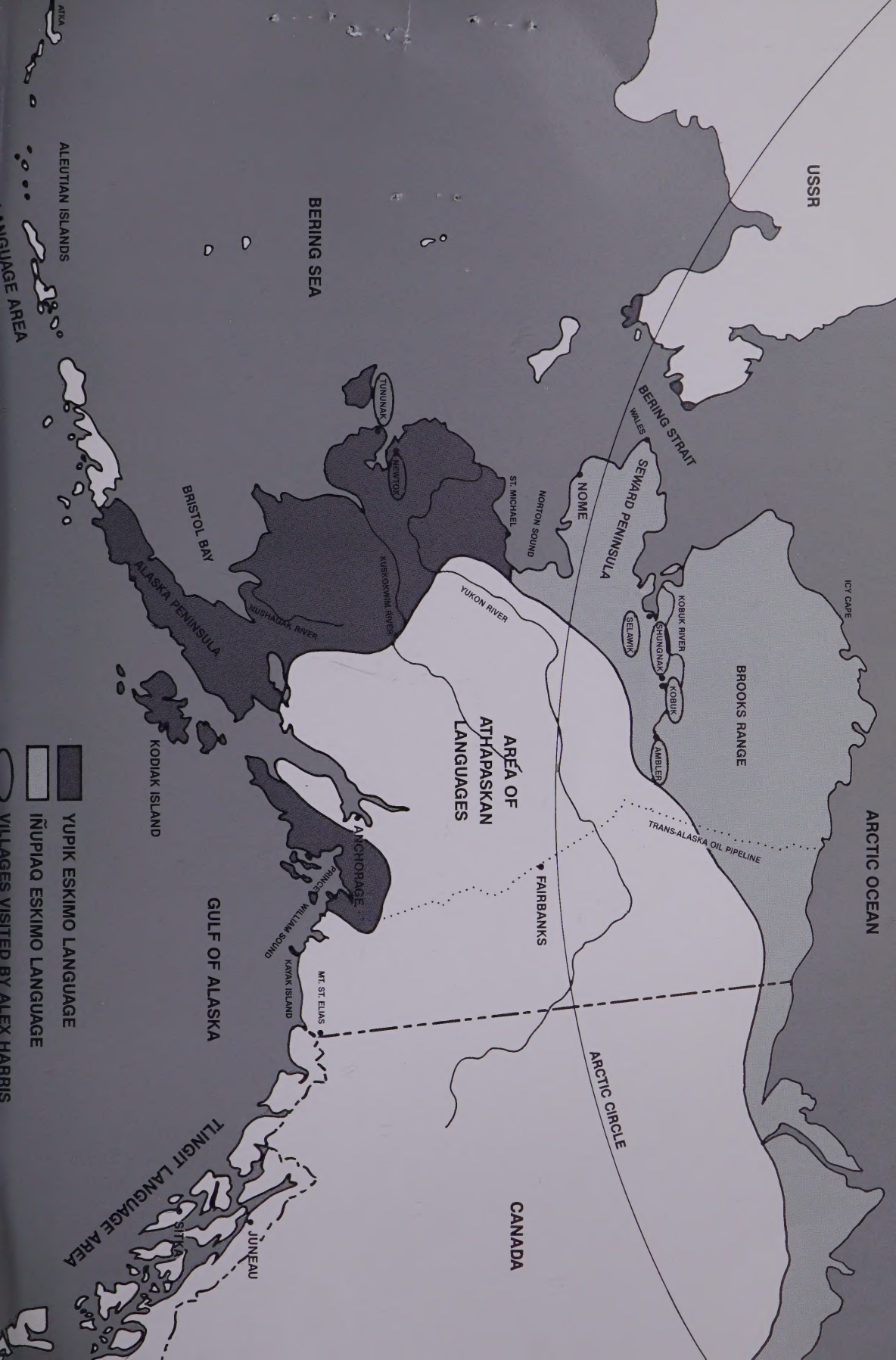
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"An Eskimo is born and he may talk like the white man (my grandchildren do, more and more) but he will never stop being part of our people."

